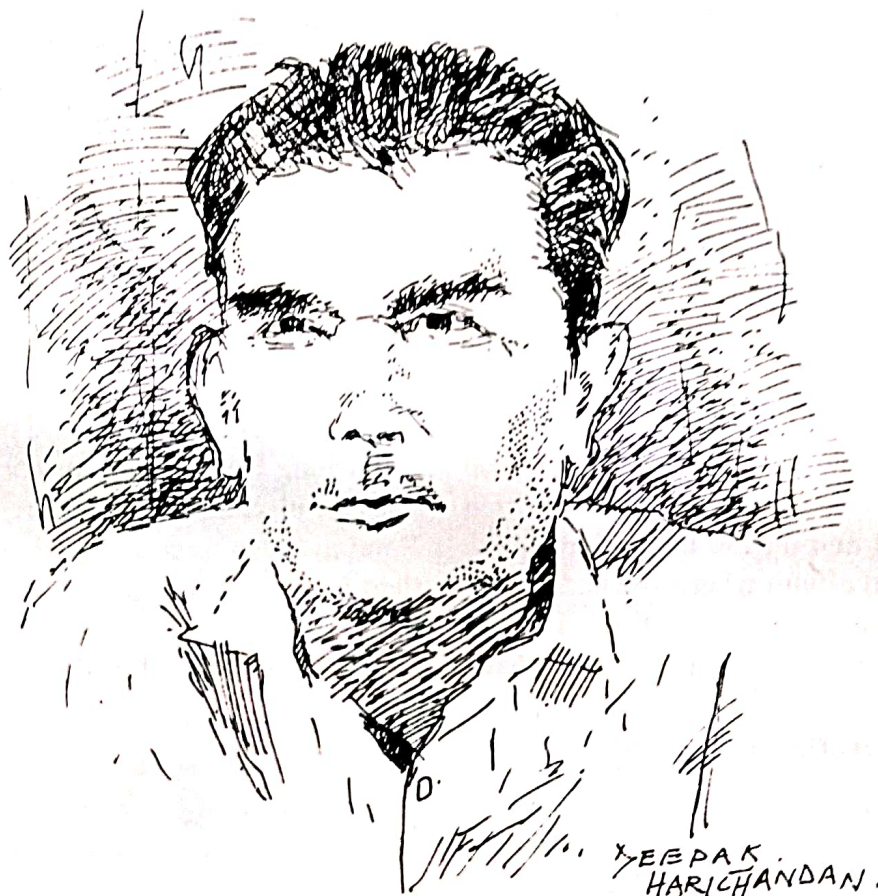


DR. RASHTRABANDHU— ENRICHING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN HINDI

—DEEPA AGARWAL



Judging by the number of admirers present at the 1994 AWIC-Sonia Memorial Award function organised by the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children, Dr. Rashtrabandhu is truly a popular figure in the world of children's writing. Considering his invaluable contribution in this field, this popularity seems well deserved.

No stranger to AWIC members, Dr. Rashtrabandhu, whose real name is Krishna Chandra Tewari, spoke freely and frankly about his work and his views on children's literature. We had

limited time at our disposal. He was leaving for Kanpur the same day and many people were vying for his attention. With some regret I decided to concentrate on his work rather than his personal life—which is definitely an important part of the complete profile of any writer.

Interestingly, Rashtrabandhu shares his birthday with two very eminent personalities—Mahatma Gandhi and Lal Bahadur Shastri. Modest about his achievements, he insisted that women are the primal creators of children's literature—in

their role as mothers and grandmothers telling stories to children. They are the ones who create the interest which often develops into a love for literature, he said.

A double M.A. (in Hindi as well as English) from Sagar University, and a Ph.D. in children's literature, Dr. Rashtrabandhu taught English in Madhya Pradesh. After retirement, he has devoted himself entirely to the cause of children's writing, though his first book was published in 1950 and he has been writing throughout his career as a teacher.

Poetry seems to be his first love, as one could judge from the delightful rhymes he recited at the function. And he is best known for his many collections of songs for children. He has also written biographies, short stories, a play, novel and travelogue for children apart from editing *Bal Sahitya Samiksha*, the only research oriented magazine for children in Hindi. An evaluator for the N.C.E.R.T. Children's Literature Awards and for Operation Blackboard, Rashtrabandhu's work has been published in practically all the children's magazines besides being broadcast over All India Radio. Many honours and awards have come his way. The Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan has awarded his book of patriotic songs. He has also received the *Sur Puraskar* and been felicitated by organisations devoted to children's literature all over the country.

Dr. Rashtrabandhu's poems appeal greatly to children because of their humour, their rhythm and music. His use of folk idiom and alliteration adds to the pleasure of reciting them and he is particular about choosing subjects close to a child's heart.

His organisation, *Bal Kalyan Sansthan* is devoted to the development of children's literature on a national level. Established in February 1980, it honours and awards writers as well as institutions and welfare organisations working in this field. Children are also awarded. About two hun-

dred writers have received awards so far. Each year it holds a seminar in a different region of the country to encourage and facilitate exchange of views and ideas between people of various states. A *Bal Kavi Sammelan* is also organised to foster young talent.

Dr. Rashtrabandhu feels that we should look towards our own country instead of setting our sights westward. Our rich and multifarious culture should be able to sustain and inspire us as writers, rather than foreign influences. He spoke of the crying need to produce low priced books for children. Books that disseminated knowledge of our own country—the achievements of people in areas as remote as Arunachal Pradesh which are not easily accessible and consequently remain unknown. He also deplored the fact that children's books are not tailored to children's interests but what adults, particularly publishers, feel should be made available to them, or what could be easily marketed. Writers too, he said, have removed themselves from children by writing what publishers demand of them.

Talking of Gujarat's popular story teller Harishbhai Nayak, he felt that that was the way to promote books and foster the reading habit—by telling stories. If such activities could be supported by state organisations and corporate houses, it would go a long way in upholding the book culture.

When asked what he enjoyed writing best, he said he has no favourite inclination but likes to write anything that gives pleasure to children. He is particular about trying out his work on children to gauge their response. Language is an important consideration—he chooses his words with care. As for experimentation, he said he has even written *sohar* for children—the folk songs generally sung after childbirth. This is a form one would not connect with children's writing but has been well received by young readers. He has sought inspiration for his poems from Marathi and

Bhojpuri folk songs, apart from other regional styles. His is what gives his rhymes that earthy, rooted-in-the-soil flavour and catchy rhythm so they roll off a child's tongue easily and stick in his mind without any effort.

Dr. Rashtrabandhu counts Dr. H.K. Devsare among the major influences on his writing, and speaks feelingly about his contribution—as the first person who wrote science fiction in Hindi and attempted a serious, critical evaluation of children's literature. Traditional literature has its own place, he says, but we must look for more contemporary themes that are of interest to mod-

ern children if we are to hold our young readers. He also felt that it was important for writers to interact with illustrators, and spoke of the need for more editors in the field of children's books, since proper evaluation required special skills.

Children's literature may be struggling to gain a strong presence on the national publishing scene, but after talking with Dr. Rashtrabandhu I felt that the movement towards better books was strongly alive. One wishes his organisation all success in its attempts to bring together writers from distant regions to the enrichment of all.

Good children's stories are considerate of the reader, as well as of the facts of life and the world. They offer something positive to help the child grow.

- Uri Schulevit

Communication plays a critical role in the creation of new ideas.

- Judith Weisman